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ABSTRACT

Although the divorce rate in Canada is growing, little Canadian research has studied the effects of family separation on children. To examine the effects of family separation on children in school-related areas, data were collected on 1241 students in kindergarten through seventh grade. Teachers completed an 11-item questionnaire for each student in their classrooms, rating students in several areas. Identical forms were completed for 152 children living in single-parent families, 1035 children living in two-parent families, and 54 children living in other family arrangements. Chi square analyses revealed significant differences among the three groups in all areas examined. The results revealed that, compared to children from two-parent families, children from single-parent families or from families with other living arrangements were more at risk academically, experienced more serious learning problems which required special instruction, exhibited poorer social behavior, were involved in more activities requiring discipline, exhibited poorer attention skills, were absent from school and complained of illness more often, and were more likely to change schools during the school year. These findings suggest that children from separated families have significantly more school-related problems than do children living with intact families. Future research should be directed toward helping children cope with family separation when it occurs. (Eight data tables and the study questionnaire are included.) (NRB)

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Canadian Children From Single-Parent Families: Are They An Overlooked Minority?

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Abstract

This report examines the effects that family separation has on the school achievement, behavior, attention to task, complaints of illness, discipline problems, absences from school, special assistance instruction, and school transfers of Canadian children from separated and intact families. Data was collected on a total of 1,241 pupils enrolled in kindergarten to grade seven. The results of this study indicate that children from separated families show significantly more school-related problem behaviours than do children from intact families.

The rate of divorce in Canada is estimated as 20 per cent and growing (Ambert, 1980). Despite this phenomenon there is relatively little Canadian research directed toward studying the effects of family separation on the achievement and social behavior of school children. Too little is known about the possible effects of family breakdown on children or the way in which school personnel might best help their pupils following family separation.

Divorce studies conducted in the United States indicate that there are no consistent findings regarding the impact of marital dissolution on children (Raschke and Raschke, 1979). Raschke and Raschke, for example, found that family structure made no significant difference in children's self-concept. Hammond (1979) found that girls from divorced families were not significantly different from girls from intact families. Hetherington (1979) on the other hand found that adolescent girls' heterosexual development can be affected by divorce. A more recent study by Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) identified as many as 37 per cent of children from divorced families as depressed years after their families' separation and looked back to life before the divorce with intense longing.

Family separation has been shown to have adverse effects on children's school achievement and social behavior. Hammond (1979) found that boys from divorced families were lower in arithmetic achievement, exhibited more distractible and acting-out behaviour and viewed their families as less happy than did obys from intact families. A school survey sponsored by the U.S. National Association of Elementary Principals discovered that children from single-parent

families were lower in achievement, presented more school discipline problems and were absent from school more often than their two-parent peers. Similar results are reported by Brown (1980) who compared the differences in school achievement, tardiness, absenteeism, discipline problems, suspension and dropouts of one-parent and two-parent children.

In support of these U.S. studies Whitford, Chapman and Boersma (1982) demonstrated that family separation is a factor associated with the school related learning problems of Canadian children. In addition, Hett (1983) found differences between Canadian children from separated and intact families in the areas of school achievement and social behaviour.

The purpose of the present study was to further examine the effects of family separation on the lives of Canadian children in several school related areas: achievement, the need for special assistance instruction, social behaviour, referrals to the principal for discipline reasons, attention to task, absences from school, complaints of illness and transfers to or from another school during the course of the school year.

METHOD

Subjects and Setting

This study was conducted in a rural school district adjacent to Victoria, British Columbia. The participating district has an elementary school population of approximately 3,600 pupils. Data was collected on a total of 1241 pupils in kindergarten to grade seven. The sample consisted of 1035 (83%) pupils from two-parent families, 152 (12%)

pupils from one-parent families and 54 (5%) pupils living in "other" family arrangements. Of these 54 pupils, 42 were living in families which had resulted from remarriages.

Procedure

Each of the elementary schools in the school district was visited by the writer. During these visits the purpose of the study was explained to the school administrator and staff. The teachers were asked to complete an eleven-item questionnaire for each pupil in their classroom. The questionnaires asked the teachers to rate their pupils along the following dimensions: achievement, social behavior, attention to task, complaints of illness, referrals to the office for discipline reasons, absence from school, the need for special assistance instruction, and transfers to or from another school during the course of the school year.

The questionnaires appeared on three forms. Each form was identical except for the headings. Form I was completed for pupils living in single-parent families, Form II for pupils from two-parent families and Form III for pupils living in "other" family arrangements. In one large elementary school only, the teachers included children from blended families in the category "other" and recorded their performances on Form III. A copy of the questionnaire appears in the Appendix.

RESULTS

Chi square was used to test the differences among the three groups (children from single-parent families, two parent families and other family arrangements) in each of the following areas: achievement, special education/ learning assistance instruction, school social behavior, referrals for

discipline reasons, attention to assigned tasks, absences from school, complaints to the teacher about physical pains or illnesses and referrals to or from another school during the course of the school year. The differences among the groups in every case were significant beyond the .001 level ($p < .001$).

Achievement

The participating teachers ranked their pupils' achievement as low, average or high. The following table shows the number and percentage of children in each of these three categories.

Insert Table 1 about here

On the whole, children from single-parent families and those from other family arrangements such as remarriages appear to be more at risk academically than do their two-parent counterparts.

Special Education Instruction

A second measure of academic achievement was obtained. Teachers were asked to indicate whether or not each of their pupils had received special education or learning assistance instruction during the course of the current school year. The results are shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

These figures identify children who were experiencing more serious learning problems. Again, children from single-parent and other family arrangements show significant disadvantage academically.

General School Behavior

The participating teachers also rated their pupils' social behavior as poor, average or excellent. These results indicate that children from single-parent families and those from other family arrangements exhibited significantly poorer social behavior than did children from two-parent families. The results are show in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Referrals to school office for discipline reasons

A second measure of school behavior was also obtained. The participating teachers identified pupils in their classrooms who they had referred to the school office during the current school year for discipline reasons. The results are shown in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

These figures identify the children in each group who exhibited more serious discipline problems. Once again, children from single-parent families and those from other family arrangements were involved in significantly more activities requiring discipline measures than were children from two-parent families.

Attention to task

The participating teachers also rated their pupils ability to concentrate on the school tasks assigned to them. Each pupil's ability to attend to assigned tasks was rated as either poor, average or excellent. The results are presented in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

Absences from school and complaints of illness

Absences from school and complaints about physical pains and illnesses were two measures used to reflect the physical health of pupils. The teachers were asked to state the number of days each pupil was absent from school and to indicate the frequency each pupil complained to them about pains or illness. The results are shown in Tables 6 and 7.

Insert Tables 6 and 7 about here

School Transfers

The participating teachers were also asked to identify whether or not each pupil had transferred to or from another school during the course of the current school year. The results are shown in Table 8.

Insert Table 8 about here

Discussion

Learning and behavior disorders observed among school children have been widely studied during the past decade. To date, however, relatively little attention has been directed towards the study of the special learning and behavior problems faced by Canadian children from separated families. The identification and understanding of these problems must preceed the development of effective remedial and counselling programs designed to correct them.

This study, supported by the research of Hammond (1979), NAESP Report (1980), Brown (1980), Whitford et al (1982) and Hett (1983), demonstrates that family separation can produce changes in a child's school performance. The child behaviors effected are achievement, time-on-task, social behavior, school discipline and school absences.

It is the responsibility of both the teaching and school counselling staff to provide appropriate instruction and services to this group of children. The school's teaching staff have the most contact with students and are in the best position to provide them with direct assistance. Teachers must become aware of the problems and symptoms associated with family separation in order to deal effectively and sensitively with the many children who come to school torn with the pain that comes from family breakdown. The school's counselling staff must develop programs which provide information and knowledge to teachers and parents about the possible effects of family separation and how to deal effectively with the associated child problem behaviors.

Direct counselling services must also be expanded to include children from separated families. Canter (1977) suggests that group

counselling with trained leaders can provide ongoing support and crisis intervention which can avert later, serious personality problems. During group counselling sessions the child can be provided the opportunity to share experiences and information, express fears, anxieties and possibly guilt. Above all, these children can come to realize that they are not alone with the emotions they are or have experienced.

In conclusion, this study indicates that children from separated and divorced families show significantly more school-related problems than do children living with intact families. Future research should be directed towards developing and evaluating programs aimed at helping children overcome their problems and to accept the realities of their family's separation. Counselling programs, teacher intervention, and bibliotherapy have been suggested by parents, teachers and counsellors. Cantor (1977), Green (1978), Kessler and Bostwich (1977), Magid (1977), Scherman (1979) and Sonnenshein-Schneider and Baird (1980) have developed counselling programs which service as potential models. However, there are few if any of these programs whose efficacy have been determined empirically. Pragmatic and empirically established intervention programs to help children of separated families are now in need of our most vigorous investigation.

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Table 1

The Number of and Percentage of Pupils in Each Group
Rated by Their Teachers as Low, Average or High Achievers

	Low	Average	High
One-parent families	55 (36%)	60 (40%)	37 (24%)
Two-parent families	206 (20%)	502 (49%)	327 (31%)
Other family arrangements	15 (28%)	28 (52%)	11 (20%)

Table 2

The Number and Percentage of Children Receiving Special Education or Learning Assistance Instruction During the Course of the School Year

One-parent children	Two-parent children	Other family arrangements
36 (24%)	141 (14%)	15 (28%)

Table 3

The Number and Percentages of Pupils in Each Group Rated by Their Teachers as Poor, Average or Excellent School Behavior

	Poor	Average	Excellent
One-parent families	33 (22%)	80 (53%)	39 (26%)
Two-parent families	81 (8%)	556 (54%)	398 (38%)
Other family arrangements	12 (22%)	27 (50%)	15 (28%)

Table 4

The Number and Percentage of Pupils in Each Group
Referred to the School Office for Discipline Reasons

One-parent families	Two-parent families	Other family arrangements
32 (21%)	105 (10%)	12 (22%)

Table 5

The Number and Percentage of Pupils in Each Group Rated by Their Teachers as Exhibiting Poor, Average, or Excellent Concentration Skills

	Poor	Average	Excellent
One-parent families	44 (30%)	72 (47%)	36 (24%)
Two-parent families	139 (13%)	538 (52%)	358 (35%)
Other family arrangements	126 (30%)	28 (52%)	10 (19%)

Table 6

The Average Number of Days Pupils in Each Group were Absent

One-parent families	Two-parent families	Other family arrangements
11.7	8.9	10.3

Table 7

The Number and Percentage of Pupils in Each Group
Who Complained a Few or Many Times about Pains or Illnesses

One-parent families	Two-parent families	Other family arrangements
83 (55%)	419 (40%)	24 (44%)

Table 8

The Number and Percentage of Pupils in Each Group
Who had Either Transferred to or From Another School
During the Course of the School Year

One-parent families	Two-parent families	Other family arrangements
26 (17%)	92 (9%)	11 (20%)

Form I - One Parent

A STUDY COMPARING

ONE-PARENT AND TWO-PARENT FAMILY CHILDREN

Name of School _____ Students Initials _____

Grade Level _____ Sex: _____ Male _____ Female

(Sex of Parent: ___Male ___Female)

Please complete this form by placing a check mark or appropriate number in the space provided.

1. Achievement in school (please check one) High ___ Average ___ Low ___
2. General behavior at school. Excellent ___ Average ___ Poor ___
3. Attention to assigned academic tasks. Excellent ___ Average ___ Poor ___
4. Complaints about pains or illness. Many ___ Few ___ None___
5. Approximate number of times referred to school office as discipline problem. ___
6. Total number of times absent. ___
7. Number of days truant. ___
8. Number of days lost due to suspension or expulsion. ___

Please check if:

9. Student receives special education or learning assistance instruction. ___
10. Student either transferred from or to another school this school year. ___
11. If student was not enrolled in your class for the entire school year please report the number of days enrolled. ___

Form II - Two Parents

A STUDY COMPARING

ONE-PARENT AND TWO-PARENT FAMILY CHILDREN

Name of School _____ Students Initials _____

Grade Level _____ Sex: _____ Male _____ Female

Please complete this form by placing a check mark or appropriate number in the space provided.

1. Achievement in school (please check one) High ___ Average ___ Low ___
2. General behavior at school. Excellent ___ Average ___ Poor ___
3. Attention to assigned academic tasks. Excellent ___ Average ___ Poor ___
4. Complaints about pains or illness. Many ___ Few ___ None___
5. Approximate number of times referred to school office as discipline problem. ___
6. Total number of times absent. ___
7. Number of days truant. ___
8. Number of days lost due to suspension or expulsion. ___

Please check if:

9. Student receives special education or learning assistance instruction. ___
10. Student either transferred from or to another school this school year. ___
11. If student was not enrolled in your class for the entire school year please report the number of days enrolled. ___

Form III - Other (e.g. foster parent)

_____
please specify

A STUDY COMPARING

ONE-PARENT AND TWO-PARENT FAMILY CHILDREN

Name of School _____ Students Initials _____

Grade Level _____ Sex: _____ Male _____ Female

Please complete this form by placing a check mark or appropriate number in the space provided.

1. Achievement in school (please check one) High ___ Average ___ Low ___
2. General behavior at school. Excellent ___ Average ___ Poor ___
3. Attention to assigned academic tasks. Excellent ___ Average ___ Poor ___
4. Complaints about pains or illness. Many ___ Few ___ None___
5. Approximate number of times referred to school office as discipline problem. ____
6. Total number of times absent. ____
7. Number of days truant. ____
8. Number of days lost due to suspension or expulsion. ____

Please check if:

9. Student receives special education or learning assistance instruction. ____
10. Student either transferred from or to another school this school year. ____
11. If student was not enrolled in your class for the entire school year please report the number of days enrolled. ____